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Being more honest but not necessarily more intelligent than others: generality and explanations for the Muhammad Ali effect

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Abstract

This research provides evidence for the generality of the Muhammad Ali effect (Allison, Messick, & Goethals, 1989), demonstrating that Dutch participants believe that the trait honesty is more descriptive of the self than of others, whereas the trait intelligence is believed to be equally descriptive of the self and others. Congruent with proposed explanations for the Muhammad Ali effect, participants regard honesty as more desirable, more controllable, and less verifiable than intelligence. Mediation analyses indicated that the Muhammad Ali effect is stronger among participants who view honesty as more desirable than intelligence. © 1998 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

INTRODUCTION

Most people perceive themselves as better than—and not as bad as—others with regard to both global attributes (e.g. trait terms such as honesty, generosity) and specific behaviours (e.g. helping a friend, taking the smaller of two remaining pieces of pizza) (see Alicke, 1985; Messick, Bloom, Boldizar, & Samuelson, 1985; for a recent overview, see Sedikides & Strube, 1997). Allison, Messick and Goethals (1989) extended this body of research by comparing self–other judgements of fair versus unfair behaviours with self–other judgements of intelligent versus unintelligent behaviours. Using converging methodology (i.e. thought-listing, self–other

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judgements), Allison *et al.* demonstrated that individuals think of the self as considerably more moral (i.e. more fair and less unfair) and only slightly more intelligent than others, a pattern of findings they termed the *Muhammad Ali effect*. The label derives from Muhammad Ali's (1975) autobiography, *The Greatest: My Own Story*. The heavyweight boxing champion was asked whether he actually had failed the army mental examination or had performed poorly to stay out of the army service. Ali's reply was 'I only said I was the greatest, not the smartest', thereby conveying a belief in being more moral, rather than more intelligent, than others.

How can the Muhammad Ali effect be explained? Allison *et al.* (1989) advanced three explanations, linking the Muhammad Ali effect to differences between the dimensions of morality and intelligence in terms of (a) desirability, (b) controllability, and (c) verifiability. The *desirability* explanation assumes that morality is a more desirable attribute than intelligence. Given that individuals assume greater superiority for attributes or behaviours that are more desirable (e.g. Alicke, 1985; Messick *et al.*, 1985), the Muhammad Ali effect may be a function of attribute desirability. The *controllability* explanation assumes that morality is more controllable than intelligence. Given that individuals are more strongly inclined to view themselves as superior to the extent that the traits are controllable (i.e. something one can choose to be or not to be; Alicke, 1985), the Muhammad Ali effect may be a function of attribute controllability. Finally, the *verifiability* explanation assumes that morality is less verifiable than intelligence. Evaluations regarding moral and immoral behaviours are closely linked to judgements of 'good' and 'bad' intentions, which tend to be unobservable and, therefore, relatively difficult to verify. In contrast, evaluations of intelligent versus unintelligent behaviours are closely linked to 'good' and 'bad' performances, which tend to be directly observable and, therefore, relatively easy to verify. Because morality judgements presumably involve greater interpretational or attributional ambiguity than intelligence judgements, it is easier to maintain the belief that one is more moral (rather than more intelligent) than others. Thus, the Muhammad Ali effect may be a function of attribute verifiability.

The current research seeks to extend prior research on the Muhammad Ali effect in several ways. First, we examine the generality of the effect by using honesty rather than fairness as an indicator of morality, thereby assuming that honesty, like fairness, tends to be more desirable, more controllable, and less verifiable than intelligence. Also, prior research (Allison *et al.*, 1989; Van Lange, 1991) examined the Muhammad Ali effect among American undergraduate students. The current research seeks to validate this effect using a Dutch sample, thereby assuming that the Muhammad Ali effect generalizes across these two nations. Indeed, there are no compelling theoretical or empirical reasons for anticipating substantial differences between the United States and the Netherlands (e.g. honesty and intelligence are evaluated similarly in the two countries; Van Lange & Kuhlman, 1994). Second, prior research examined specific behaviours, but has not tested whether the Muhammad Ali effect is observable in individuals' general perceptions of the self and others. That is, given that traits imply a greater stability than specific behaviours, it becomes important to test whether individuals ascribe greater levels of the trait honesty than the trait intelligence to themselves than to others. Third, we test three explanations of the Muhammad Ali effect, and predict that individuals regard honesty as (a) more desirable, (b) more controllable, and (c) less verifiable than intelligence. Finally, we explore whether

judgements of desirability, controllability, and verifiability mediate the Muhammad Ali effect.

METHOD

Participants and Design

Participants were 156 Free University undergraduate students. They were recruited through an advertisement in the Free University paper. The experimental session took place in 15 separate cubicles and included several questionnaires (most of which were unrelated to this study). Participants were paid Dfl. 15.00 (15 Dutch guilders is about \$9 in American currency). The experiment used a 2 (Trait Term: honesty versus intelligence) by 2 (Trait Valence: positive versus negative) mixed-factor design, with Trait Term represented as a within-participants factor. Trait Valence was a between-participants factor, and was included to examine the generalizability of the Muhammad Ali effect across both poles of each trait dimension.

Judgements of Desirability, Controllability, Verifiability, and Self–Other Superiority

We assessed judgements of desirability by asking ‘How positive versus negative do you regard honesty?’ (dishonesty, intelligence, unintelligence; 1 = extremely negative, 11 = extremely positive) and ‘How desirable versus undesirable do you regard honesty?’ (1 = extremely undesirable, 11 = extremely desirable). Responses to the two questions were significantly correlated (for honesty, dishonesty, intelligence, and unintelligence, respective $r(156)$ s were 0.77, 0.40, 0.62, and 0.48, all $ps < 0.01$). Thus, we derived and entered the mean for each trait in subsequent analyses.

We assessed judgements of controllability by asking ‘To what extent can a person change his/her honesty in a direction he or she desires (e.g. becoming more honest)’ (1 = not at all changeable, 11 = very changeable), and ‘To what extent can one influence honesty, such that one can choose whether or not to be honest’ (1 = not at all modifiable, 11 = very modifiable). Responses to the two questions were significantly correlated (for honesty, dishonesty, intelligence, and unintelligence, respective $r(156)$ s were 0.64, 0.52, 0.59 and 0.59, all $ps < 0.01$). Thus, we derived and entered the mean for each trait in subsequent analyses.

We assessed judgements of verifiability by asking ‘To what extent can one infer honesty from someone’s behaviour (1 = not at all inferable, 11 = very inferable) and ‘How easy or difficult is it to judge someone’s honesty on the basis of his/her behaviour?’ (1 = very difficult, 11 = very easy). Responses to the two questions were significantly correlated (for honesty, dishonesty, intelligence, and unintelligence, respective $r(156)$ s were 0.77, 0.73, 0.79, and 0.80, all $ps < 0.01$). Thus, we derived and entered the mean for each trait in subsequent analyses.

We assessed general perceptions of self–other superiority by asking ‘How honest (e.g. dishonest, intelligent, unintelligent) are you in comparison to the average student at the Free University’. Participants responded to an 11-point scale (1 = I am much less honest than the average Free University student, 6 = I am as honest as the average

Free University student, and 11 = I am much more honest than the average Free University student).

RESULTS

Test of the Muhammad Ali Effect

Degree of self–other superiority was analysed in a 2 (Trait Valence) by 2 (Trait Term) analysis of variance (ANOVA), with the latter factor being a within-participants variable. Consistent with the Muhammad Ali effect, relative to others, participants perceived themselves as more honest and less dishonest ($M = 7.22$, $S.D. = 1.42$) than intelligent and unintelligent ($M = 6.77$, $S.D. = 1.45$), as indicated by a main effect for Trait Term, $F(1,154) = 7.86$, $p < 0.01$. Neither the main effect for Trait Valence, $F(1,154) = 0.16$, n.s., nor the interaction of Trait Valence and Trait Term, $F(1,154) = 1.67$, n.s., was significant, indicating that the Muhammad Ali is not moderated by the positive versus negative poles of the trait terms.

Tests Relevant to the Desirability, Controllability, and Verifiability Explanations

Judgements of desirability, controllability, and verifiability were submitted to three 2 (Trait Valence) by 2 (Trait Term) ANOVAs, with the latter variable being a within-participants variable. We recoded ratings of desirability in the negative valence condition so that higher scores indicate greater negativity. Consistent with the *desirability explanation*, a main effect for Trait Term, $F(1,154) = 124.97$, $p < 0.001$, revealed that participants viewed honesty ($M = 9.56$, $S.D. = 1.25$) as more desirable than intelligence ($M = 8.30$, $S.D. = 1.27$), and viewed dishonesty ($M = 9.98$, $S.D. = 1.04$) as more undesirable than unintelligence ($M = 8.39$, $S.D. = 1.45$). No other effect for judgements of desirability was significant.

Consistent with the *controllability explanation*, a main effect for Trait Term, $F(1,154) = 187.20$, $p < 0.001$, revealed that participants viewed honesty and dishonesty ($M = 8.28$, $S.D. = 1.91$) as more controllable than intelligence and unintelligence ($M = 5.38$, $S.D. = 2.23$). No other effect for judgements of controllability was significant.

Finally, consistent with the *verifiability explanation*, a main effect of Trait Term, $F(1,154) = 13.23$, $p < 0.001$, revealed that participants viewed honesty and dishonesty ($M = 5.98$, $S.D. = 2.19$) as less verifiable than intelligence and unintelligence ($M = 6.74$, $S.D. = 2.31$). No other effect for judgements of verifiability was significant.

Mediation of the Muhammad Ali Effect by Judgements of Desirability, Controllability, and Verifiability

We examined the patterns of intercorrelations among the three possible mediators of the Muhammad Ali effect (i.e. judgements of desirability, controllability, and verifiability). Correlational analyses revealed that these associations were inconsistent

and modest in magnitude. Only two of six possible correlations were significant. For honesty, there were significant links between desirability and controllability judgements, $r(156) = 0.30$, $p < 0.001$, and between controllability and verifiability judgements, $r(156) = 0.34$, $p < 0.001$. For intelligence, none of the judgements were significantly correlated.

To provide evidence relevant to the mediating role of the three judgements, we examined whether the Muhammad Ali effect becomes substantially weaker or even absent when we control for judgements of desirability, controllability, and verifiability. Mediation of all three judgements was examined in a 2 (Trait Valence) by 2 (Trait Term) analysis of covariance (ANCOVA), in which judgements of desirability, controllability, and verifiability were included simultaneously as covariates. In support of mediation, this analysis revealed that the main effect for Trait Term was no longer significant, $F(1,151) = 1.99$, n.s. To determine more precisely which of the three judgements mediated the Muhammad Ali effect, we conducted three separate analyses of covariance, in which each of these judgements was included as a covariate. First, a 2 (Trait Valence) by 2 (Trait Term) ANCOVA, in which judgements of desirability were included as a covariate, revealed that the main effect for Trait Term was no longer significant, $F(1,153) = 0.44$, n.s. This supports the mediating role of judgements of desirability in account for the Muhammad Ali effect. Second, a 2 (Trait Valence) by 2 (Trait Term) ANCOVA, in which judgements of controllability were included as a covariate, revealed that the main effect for Trait Term remained significant, $F(1,153) = 5.57$, $p < 0.05$. Third, a 2 (Trait Valence) by 2 (Trait Term) ANCOVA, in which judgements of verifiability were included as a covariate, revealed that the main effect for Trait Term remained significant, $F(1,153) = 9.44$, $p < 0.01$.

Thus, these analyses reveal that judgements of desirability mediate the Muhammad Ali effect, whereas judgements of controllability and verifiability do not mediate the Muhammad Ali effect. Moreover, given that the associations among the mediators was inconsistent and modest in magnitude, these analyses provide evidence in support of the unique contribution of desirability in accounting for the Muhammad Ali effect.¹

DISCUSSION

The present study among Dutch participants provides evidence in support of the generality of the Muhammad Ali effect, in that perceived superiority was more pronounced for the trait honesty than for the trait intelligence. These findings extend and complement prior research, conducted in the United States, which has focused on self–other judgements for specific behaviours (Allison *et al.*, 1989; Van Lange, 1991). The current findings also provide evidence relevant to three potential explanations of the Muhammad Ali effect. Individuals perceive honesty as more desirable, more

¹Not surprisingly, correlational analyses corroborated the results of the ANCOVAs, supporting the mediating role of judgements of desirability, rather than judgements of controllability or verifiability. Differences in the extent to which honesty was viewed as more desirable than intelligence were positively associated with differences in the extent to which individuals viewed themselves as more superior in terms of honesty than in terms of intelligence, $r(156) = 0.16$, $p < 0.05$. Such links were not significant for judgements of controllability, $r(156) = -0.05$, n.s., or verifiability, $r(156) = 0.11$, n.s.

controllable, and less verifiable than they perceive intelligence, thereby providing evidence for Allison *et al.*'s theorizing. That is, the *potential* mechanisms underlying the Muhammad Ali effect are threefold: the belief in one's unique moral qualities is exceptionally desirable, indicative of good intentions (e.g. *I choose to be honest*), and relatively easy to sustain. Yet, as our mediation analyses revealed, the Muhammad Ali effect is stronger among individuals who exhibit greater tendencies toward perceiving honesty as more desirable than intelligence. Because such mediation was nonsignificant for judgements of controllability and judgements of verifiability, the *actual* mechanism underlying the Muhammad Ali effect, as observed in the present study, would seem to be rooted in the tendency to regard honesty as more desirable than intelligence.

In this regard, it is interesting to note that the Muhammad Ali effect has only been demonstrated among students who are asked to compare themselves with other students at their university (see Allison *et al.*, 1989; Van Lange, 1991). Presumably, students are not only more intelligent than non-students, but are also likely to regard intelligence as more desirable than non-students. If it is indeed true that non-students value intelligence to a lesser extent, then it is plausible that the Muhammad Ali effect may be even more pronounced among non-students. Of course, this does not exclude the possibility that the Muhammad Ali effect may be substantially weaker or even reversed among populations or in contexts in which intelligence, rather than morality, is regarded as the more desirable attribute. Yet, given that much of human life unfolds in the context of dyadic or group interaction, it would be quite a challenge to identify populations or contexts (at least, social contexts) in which intelligence would be regarded as more desirable than morality. In the final analysis, the Muhammad Ali effect may well be rooted in experiences of social interaction, which incite the desirability of moral actions to a greater degree than the desirability of intelligent actions.

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